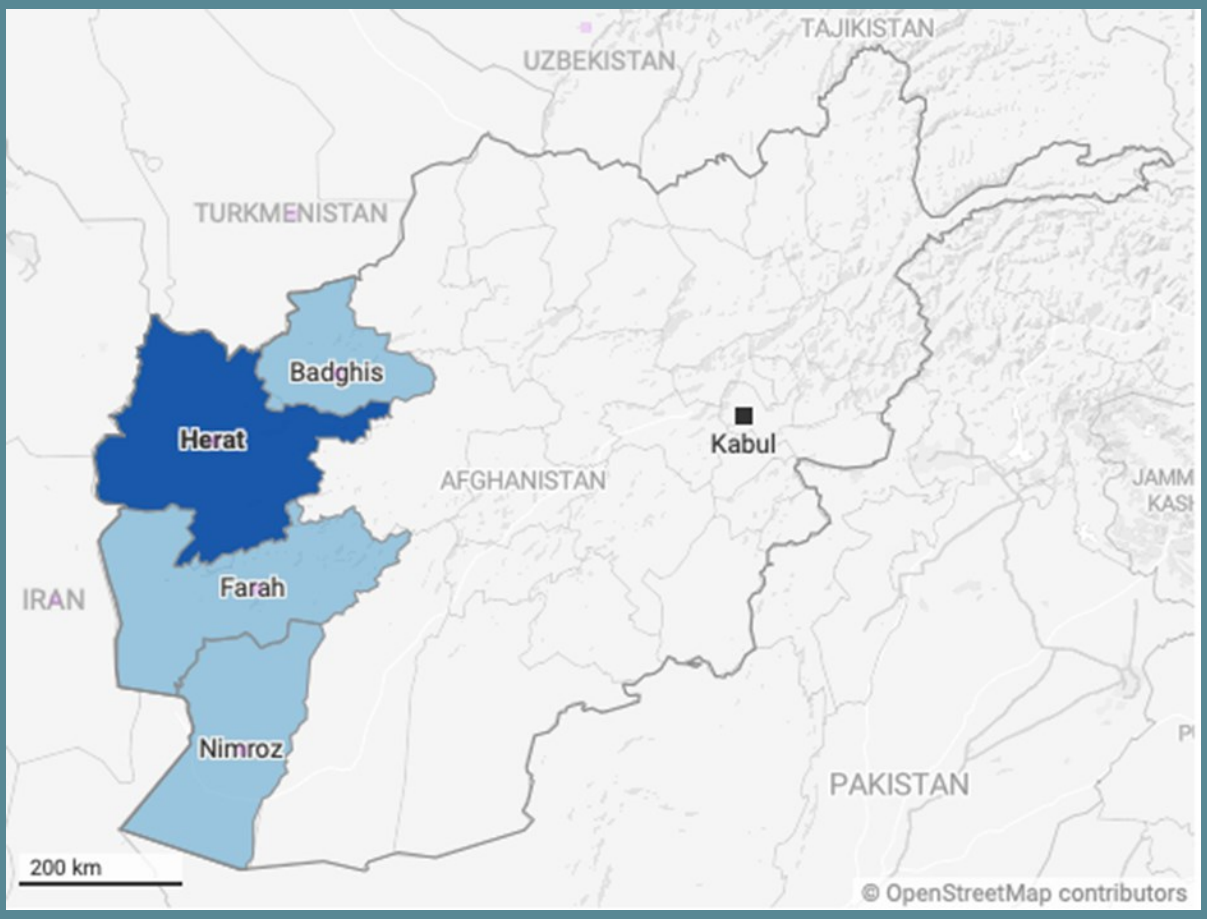
Local Dynamics of Conflict and Peace in Western Afghanistan

Findings from a Local Forum for Peace



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Reaching Out for Peace is a joint project of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Afghanistan, Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO) and Mediothek Afghanistan for Development and Peace Organization (MADPO).

The project is designed to facilitate regular community level exchanges on local impediments to and opportunities for peace in and between seven regional nodes: Kandahar, Herat, Balkh, Badakhshan, Bamyan, Nangarhar, and Kabul.

Local forums for peace are held to engage Afghans "where they are" on ways to overcome conflict through dialogue, exchange, and activism. As such, these events encourage active participation at the community level in efforts to build a common vision for peace. Ensuing publications and visual media outputs help to inform sub-national, national, and international stakeholders and provide recommendations for future engagement.

This brief was prepared by Lucile Martin and Saeed Parto as part of a partnership between FES, MADPO, and APPRO.

On March 29, 2021, a local forum for peace was held in Herat city, bringing together civil society representatives from the broad geographical western region of Afghanistan: Herat, Badghis, Farah, and the south-western province of Nimroz. An overview of basic demographic, geographic, economic and conflict features of each province is provided below, followed by an overview of proceedings of the forum. The brief ends with general conclusions from the discussions.

Background

Sporadic fighting has taken place in all provinces throughout 2019-20 and into 2021. Clashes between armed opposition groups (AOGs) and Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF) in Farah, Badghis, and Ghor have led to the displacement of populations toward Nimroz, Herat, Faryab, and Kandahar provinces (OCHA 2019; 2020). Conflict patterns, however, vary between these provinces, and within them. As can be seen in Figure 1, each province also displays distinct demographic and socio-economic characteristics.

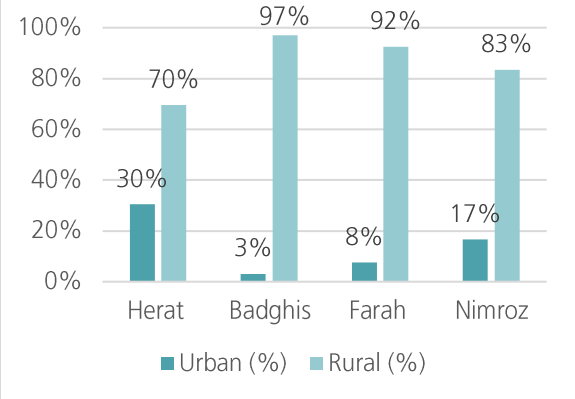
Figure 1: Population Estimates (2020)

Province	Total	Urban	Rural
Herat	2,140,662	652,224	1,488,548
Badghis	549,583	16,953	532,630
Farah	563,026	42,752	520,274
Nimroz	183,554	30,368	153,186

Source: NSIA (2021)[1]

Bordering Iran to the west and Turkmenistan to the north, ***Herat*** province is a regional trading hub. With an estimated population of over 2.1 million, a rough third of which live in the provincial capital and its surroundings, Herat is the province with the largest urban population. Largely Dari-speaking, Herat city contrasts with rural districts where the population consists mostly of Pashto speakers, and Turkmeni and Uzbeki-speaking minorities.

Figure 2: Share of Urban and Rural Populations



Based on NSIA (2021).

The population of Herat city has tripled since 2001, a change accompanied by rapid and haphazard urbanization (USIP 2015). Demographic growth is, in part, attributed to the repatriation of migrants from Iran and displacement from neighboring provinces due to insecurity, severe drought, and flash floods.

Relatively spared by the political violence affecting much of the country since 2006, Herat city has witnessed increased sectarian divisions with a rising number of targeted attacks against Shi'a worshippers and religious figures.

Part of the sectarian tension in the city is attributed to the changing demography, following the return of Shi'a migrants from Iran, and more generally, to the radicalization of sectarian groups (Fazemi 2019). In 2020, at least seven out of fifteen districts in Herat province were considered as partly controlled by the Taliban.

[1] Estimates are based on government figures. There are indications actual numbers might be higher.

Badghis and Farah are overwhelmingly rural with 97% and 92% of their inhabitants, respectively, living in rural areas. Living in villages distant from the provincial center entails limited access to already scarce basic services, made even less accessible due to deficient road infrastructure and intermittent fighting.

To the east of Herat along Afghanistan's northern border with Turkmenistan, ***Badghis*** has the highest rate of multidimensional poverty in Afghanistan, at 86% – as compared to 48% in Nimroz, 58% in Herat, and 67% in Farah (UNDP 2020). Insurgent activity has soared in the provinces since 2016, with several districts falling under Taliban control in 2019 and 2020. There are also reports of presence of the Islamic State - Khorasan Province (ISKP).

Violent confrontations between AOGs and ANSF are also a feature in ***Farah*** to the south of Herat province along the border with Iran. Taliban forces have carried out offensives to capture the provincial center in October 2016, early 2018, and August-September 2019 – with immediate consequences on the general economic and social situation in the city (Ruttig 2018).

Nimroz, to the south of Farah, neighbors Iran to the west and Pakistan to the south. The province occupies a strategic position for smuggling of goods (including drugs) and persons. Insurgent activity is lower than in the three other provinces. The majority of the casualties reported in 2019 were caused by airstrikes (UNAMA 2019).

More generally, the government's lack of reach and its often-contested presence in rural areas of the four provinces, compels citizens to resort primarily to Taliban courts for resolving conflicts within their communities.

Herat Forum for Peace:
An Overview

A total of 60 participants (33 men and 27 women) from the abovementioned provinces attended the local forum for peace in Herat city. Participation of residents from Ghor, initially envisaged, could not take place due to security concerns.

The participants included academics, male and female representatives of the private sector, youth activists, government employees, and NGOs. Local ulema were also present.

The format of local forums entails participants discussing among themselves and agreeing on the key drivers of conflict at the community level. These drivers are presented to panelists tasked to suggest ways in which these drivers can be addressed through local, community-level initiatives.

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In Herat, four panelists responded to participants' observations on drivers of conflict in Western Afghanistan and ways to address them. The panelists consisted of a representative from the Provincial Office of the Attorney General in Herat, a professor from the Faculty of Shari'a Law at Herat University, a legal expert, and a civil society representative.

Another component of the local forums for peace is an open discussion among participants on expectations surrounding peace and the potential advent of a negotiated deal between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Expectations for peace and factors of local conflict identified by participants are outlined below.

Participants' Expectations About Peace

Most participants were rather optimistic about the potential implications of a negotiated agreement between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic. Notably, many felt that an end to active conflict would bring about stability and economic opportunities in trade and investment and would create conditions for more balanced development and reconstruction in urban and rural areas alike.

Effective rule of law and reduced corruption were also underlined as two expected outcomes of a negotiated peace between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic.

Major concerns about the consequences of a negotiated peace centered on limits to citizens' civil and political rights and freedoms, further restrictions on women's participation in the labor force and political activity in urban centers and reduced international assistance. Some also expressed concern about the impunity of war criminals and the concentration of power in the hands of political groups and parties.

Local Factors of Conflict

Four main factors of local conflict were outlined:

- Rising influence of extremist groups,
- Divisions based on ethno-linguistic and sectarian affiliation,
- Lack of rule of law, and
- Poor governance.

The specifics of each factor and ways to overcome them, discussed in groups, are outlined below.

Issue 1: Rising Influence of Extremist AOGs and the Illicit Economy

Participants expressed concern about the spread of extremist ideas in communities across the Western region, including the recent increase in the presence of the ISKP. This increase was attributed to social fragmentation and a low level of social interactions between different segments of the population.

Unmonitored religious schools (*madrassas*) were pointed out as a major driver in the propagation of extremism, with male youth particularly exposed to fundamentalist and extremist ideas. This vulnerability was attributed to a general scarcity of social and cultural life combined with a lack of economic opportunities, particularly in remote areas.

The porosity of international borders was also underlined as a contributing factor to the ease at which smuggling, and trafficking take place, facilitating the emergence of a drug economy which benefits extremist AOGs and local powerholders, and feeds into conflict dynamics.

Addressing extremism would require joint efforts on educational, cultural, and religious grounds. In particular, many felt that the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (MoHRA) should take a leading role in these efforts by providing guidance and effective monitoring of the currently poorly regulated madrassas.

The importance of the drug economy in the region as a source of livelihood for rural communities was also underlined as a major source of destabilization and conflict. The Western region of Afghanistan is the second largest poppy-producing region in the country, and a smuggling hub due to its strategic location along the border.

Investment in the development of alternative cash crops such as saffron, tested successfully in the Herat province, was suggested as an alternative for poppy-producing provinces, including Badghis and Farah, respectively the fourth and fifth largest opium poppy cultivating provinces in the country in 2019 (UNODC 2021).

More generally, government institutions, with limited reach outside of district centers, were considered as having been largely incapable of addressing the general concerns of the population and the specific challenge of the rise in the spread of extremism:

> *Government officials […] always say "we are interested [in addressing extremism], we have influence." But we can all judge for ourselves: have they done anything or is it the extremists who have been active? – Male participant 1, civil society.*

Issue 2: Ethno-linguistic and Sectarian Divisions

Conflict and violence within communities are seen as underpinned by divisions based on ethnic affiliation and belonging to the Sunni or Shi'a sect. Participants from Herat, where targeted violence against members of the Shi'a community has increased in recent years, emphasized the political exploitation of sectarian divisions by powerholders who profit from the conflict.

Religious scholars are considered as having the highest authority and capacity to address such issues. The Herat Council of Islamic Brotherhood was pointed to as having been instrumental, so far, in preventing violence from further escalation. Officially established in Herat in 2016, the Council brings together Shi'a and Sunni Hanafi religious scholars to discuss and debate ways toward religious unity while criticizing secular policies of Western donors as a cause of social divisions in the country (AVA 2016).

Participants expressed diverse opinions about the role of elders at the community level. Some saw elders as important stakeholders with the capacity to

diffuse tensions, while others considered them members of a generation that had brought about division and destruction.

Finally, the participants raised the role of the media and civil society organizations in combatting divisive views and raising awareness about commonalities rather than distinctions.

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Issue 3: Lack of Rule of Law

A key driver of persistent conflict was identified as the fact that constitutional and legal provisions for protecting the rights of the citizens are poorly and inequitably implemented.

The impunity of those with power contributes to the pervasiveness of violence as a mode of governance. This impunity seriously affects the citizens' trust in the justice system, particularly as, by contrast, the vulnerable and those who lack connections or the ability to pay bribes are seldom taken seriously. When charged with an offense, they are often punished in ways considered disproportionate and arbitrary:

> *In this very city [Herat], I see individuals who have committed murders and who roam about freely on a daily basis. […] I know someone from Ghorian who did not kill anyone but spent 12 years in prison. – Male participant 2, independent.*

Participants expressed little hope the issues above could be resolved because of institutionalized corruption and nepotism, particularly within the judiciary.

Issue 4: Poor Governance

Closely related to deficiencies and inequities in the justice sector is the widespread administrative corruption. Participants report corruption and nepotism plague daily dealings between citizens and the administration, derail law enforcement, affect appointments and recruitment in public institutions, and curtail the efficiency of public services. For example,

> *When I think about the depth of administrative corruption, it is even worse than terrorism. I can think of a whole array of ways in which administrative corruption contributes to the development of terrorism, of how it assisted the growth of AOGs - Taliban and others. – Male participant 2, independent.*

Another participant stressed:

> *Work is not given to the hard-working and competent. Many members of this society are meriting, competent, knowledgeable, love their country, and care about their people. Unfortunately, they are not allowed to work in government offices and play the role that they could. Unless a system [based on merit] is put in place, we cannot talk of good governance, nor achieve peace. – Male participant 3, civil society.*

Conclusions

In the local forum for peace in Herat and elsewhere, a key challenge has been maintaining the focus of the responses by the panelists to local factors and actors that could play a role in resolving local conflicts. The panelists have generally tended to focus on external factors, such as the meddling of foreign countries in Afghanistan's internal affairs, or the role of Afghan "foreign agents" spreading extremist ideas, rather than on the specific community-level issues raised by the participants.

Concerning the local dynamics of conflict, a first observation is the deep interconnection between factors evoked in discussions. Endemic and systemic corruption and a lack of rule of law run through all the issues raised. The majority of participants perceive them as paralyzing economic development, distorting opportunities for citizens, feeding into political manipulation of interest groups, preventing accountability and transparency in governance, and undermining confidence in formal institutions of governance.

A second finding from the Herat forum relates to the strong focus of discussions on the impact of the drug economy on local conflicts and the connections between criminal networks and local politicians. Failure to address drug trafficking was

notably associated with insufficient attention to the economic plight of rural inhabitants who often have no choice but to rely on poppy cultivation, processing, and trafficking for subsistence.

When discussing ways to address the issues raised, participants consistently portrayed those with the highest interest in addressing factors of conflict as unable to do so: citizens and civil society because they are disempowered, government institutions because they are inefficient and corrupt, academic institutions because they lack resources and access to powerful actors.

By contrast, actors considered as having the highest potential influence in local affairs are either seen as having low levels of interest in engaging in conflict resolution – this is the case with the majority of religious leaders; or being precisely those with the most destructive potential – such as local power-holders and drug lords.

Another recurrent element in discussions is the need for more systematic community engagement, involving local and religious leaders in addressing some of the root causes of conflict. The importance of engaging communities who support the Taliban was also underlined by both the participants and the panelists.

Formal education is often raised as one of the main instruments for addressing divisions that drive conflicts and to counter extremist views leading to violent acts toward fellow civilians. However, as one participant from Badghis pointed out, education is a divisive issue. What education entails, the issues covered in curricula, the conditions under which education could or should be delivered are matters of contention among the parties involved in the conflict as the recent attacks on schools in Farah and Badghis have illustrated (UNAMA 2019, Tolonews 2019, Omar 2020).

Nevertheless, participants outlined that developing a common way forward for the institutionalization of education at the local level would require engaging both partisans of the Islamic Republic and those of the Taliban at the community level – particularly and including in remote areas.
The intended focus of the forum was on local dynamics of conflict. However, the looming presence of ongoing negotiations between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic team in Doha, Qatar was felt throughout the proceedings of the forum. The focus on Doha has a bearing on understandings of "peace" – understood not as the absence of conflict, but as a deal struck between politicians and warlords. "Peace," from this viewpoint, is seen as having been hijacked by stakeholders disconnected from the realities faced by ordinary citizens.

The participants' observations about social, economic, and structural drivers of tensions and conflict at the local level reveal that effective peace will require more than a deal at the highest level between warring parties.

Systematic and systemic engagement to address the underlying drivers of inequity, inequality, and poverty is crucial in ensuring that social and societal tensions are diffused, and sustainable peace is achieved.

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